

# Thinking With the Church: Essays in Historical Theology

## B.A. Gerrish

Reviewed by Jim West

Revelation is, it's fair to say, one of the central concerns of Christian theology. In the second part of his book Gerrish examines revelation and reason (chapter 1) and errors and insights in our understanding of revelation (chapter 2).

Gerrish discusses various approaches to revelation and then spends the bulk of his time in chapter one with deism.

The often caustic, always subversive arguments of the Deists provoked an astonishing quantity of orthodox replies. ... But in retrospect one is bound to view the entire controversy as a mere pause on the way from orthodox Christian faith to thoroughgoing skepticism (p. 15).

Doubtless he is correct. Yet without Deism one can hardly imagine the thoroughgoing skepticism we observe today.

When Gerrish gets to chapter two, titled *Errors and Insights in the Understanding of Revelation* he does some very, very fine work.

The previous chapter sought to line up impartially the positions of the critics and the apologists in the Deist Controversy. I must now venture to offer a more critical appraisal of the many sided debate, and to compare my own conclusions with the opinions of colleagues who speak for Feuerbach, Barth, and Schleiermacher (p. 36).

To do so he starts off with a look at the classical concept of revelation, and then he offers an alternative approach based on Calvin's doctrine of revelation. Gerrish refers again to the metaphor of the man seeing poorly until he puts on spectacles and then observes, in a flash of brilliant insight

From this perspective, revelation is not supernaturally conveyed information but divinely improved vision (p. 41, citing Calvin's *Institutes* 1.6.1, and 14.1.2).

Gerrish next summarizes Calvin's doctrine thusly

By revelation is meant a moment of disclosure that focuses our perception of our world and of ourselves, and faith is the enduring insight that corresponds to this disclosure (p. 42).

Gerrish concludes his treatment of revelation by glancing briefly at Feurbach, Barth and Schleiermacher. His admiration for both Barth and Schleiermacher is made plain and writ large. In a bit of self disclosure he comments on his student days and glows that he and his fellows learned a great deal from Brunner, especially that Scripture is a

... fallible human witness to the Word of God in Jesus Christ...

And that

*Deus dixit* and *Paulus dixit*, we learned, are not quite the same (p. 51).

A lesson fundamentalists to this day haven't, or won't, learn.

The chapter, and the section, concludes with a defense of special revelation. Gerrish writes that Calvin is certainly correct when he says

It is one thing to feel that God as our Maker supports us by his power, governs us by his providence, nourishes us by his goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings – and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ (p. 61).

This provokes Gerrish to say that

... the heart of the Christian theological enterprise is the theme of revelation and faith under the conditions that threaten faith and the condition of its renewal (p. 62).

In Part Two Gerrish will turn to Faith and Morals. That's where our next installment will find us.